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NEWS
FROM YOUR MUSEUM

Know your Museum better

THE ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

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TOTEM-POLES

Most of us are familiar with the appearance of totem-poles: towering posts carved with a series of animal and human figures, set one above the other, and often embellished with paint--a style of sculpture grotesque, perhaps, but strong. The average person, however, is ignorant of their significance in the lives of those who have made them. He does not know, for instance, that they belong only to the coastal tribes of British Columbia and Alaska,a region of easily worked wood and of skilful aboriginal carpenters, where ancestral pride and the concept of rank were highly developed.

We do not know why or when, in the days before Vancouver or Cook,some west coast Indian conceived the idea of carving the upright supporting posts of his house with designs reminding him of the deeds of his forefathers; presumably, by relating the traditions surrounding the depicted figures, he enhanced his own and his family's greatness. Nor do we know why certain conventionalizations became established to denote certain animals or birds (non-human beings supposedly encountered by the owner's ancestors),or why,in human depictions, the sculptor concentrated on the head. These styles were already established before the first explorers reached the coast.

With the coming of the white man, however, came wealth from the fur-trade for the Indian chiefs, increasing class distinction and pride, so that, with work made easy by metal tools,the utilitarian house post would no longer suffice. About 1820 some unknown chief conceived the idea of carving the fame of his family upon a post which rose above the house--a true totem-pole. The practice spread, and from that date until about 1900 rival chiefs vied in erecting ever-larger posts, the only purpose of which was to blazon forth the glory of their ancestors and themselves.

It was a swan song. New desires and new modes of thought have come with the white man,and totem-poles are falling into decay. The only examples which will survive are in such institutions as the Royal Ontario Museum. Paradoxically, they are valued and preserved by the white man who was indirectly responsible for the changes which made possible their erection, and who was more directly responsible for their disappearance with the decline of the mode of life of which they were a part.

NEXT QUESTION, PLEASE?

"Will the little flat white insects in the house I've just moved into eat my good rugs?" asked an anxious lady of an entomologist in the Royal Ontario Museum. Answer,- "NO". The insects, called "silver-fish", will not eat rugs but they will eat any starch material and may attack wall paper. Remedy,--Pyrethrum powder spread around the margin of the baseboard. This powder is not poisonous.

Early Summer Woods 200,000,000 B.C.

Rambling through the woods in early June young ferns can everywhere be seen unrolling their tiny fronds of tender green. In the Royal Ontario Museum this modern picture is shifted backward in time to a swampy scene in Nova Scotia where, some 200,000,000 years ago, the forerunners of these ferns with their exquisite foliage, very modern in appearance, flourished.

Generation after generation of these fern-like plants became buried in the muds of these swamps. Many of them in due time became changed through heat and pressure into coal. Others that escaped this drastic treatment by Nature remained little changed in general form. Some of these delicate fronds, now preserved in black shaly rock, gaze at you from their new haunts, the museum case.

THE HOUSE-FLY - A MENACE TO MAN

What does a house-fly look like,say, to a germ? Mr. T.B. Kurata of the Royal Ontario Museum has worked this out. With painstaking dexterity he has produced a model of the house-fly on a scale 187,200 times the original volume. The model shows the spines and hairs which cover the body like porcupine quills, the large globular eyes made up of thousands of small eyes; and the sucking mouth which is extended to show its parts. Another similar model displays the fly's brain, heart and stomach. One small part of a fly's foot has been enlarged 200,700,000,000 times to show small bacteria clinging to the claws. A culture dish shows the growth of bacteria introduced by the house-fly and a dead mouse is displayed as the nursery of the young flies or maggots. To properly impress the Museum visitor with the unpleasant contact of flies and man a giant house-fly is seen secreting saliva and faeces upon the icing of a piece of cake. Altogether, the common fly is exposed as an unwholesome creature to have about the house.

TO OUT-OF-TOWN VISITORS

When in the city visit the Royal Ontario Museum - it happens to be located in Toronto but it belongs to YOU.

VISITING HOURS AT MUSEUM

Week days except Monday 10 a.m. - 5 p.m.
Sundays 2 p.m. - 5 p.m.
Closed all day Monday.